

An Interview With
The Top Man At SEMTA,
And Others

Will The Auto Capital Buy Rapid Transit?

By TIM RICHARD

Talking "mass transit" in metropolitan Detroit, the automobile capital of the world, used to be like shipping coal to Newcastle.

No more. A regional program of public transportation by bus and rail will definitely be part of the 1990 plan when it's adopted in a few months by the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments, and there is already a regional agency set up to go into the mass transit business.

That agency, SEMTA, is still small and weakly financed, to be sure. But it has some consultants and some direction, and the man who is its chief spokesman sees positive signs of hope.

SEMTA is the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority. Only about 1½ years old, it was set up under state law to serve six counties — Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, St. Clair, Washtenaw and Monroe.

It has a staff of 17 persons who occupy a suite of offices 17 floors above the corner of Grand River and Washington Boulevard in downtown Detroit. That puts it just across the street from SEMCOG and TALUS (Transportation and Land Use Study). The location is no accident.

THE MAN IN CHARGE is William H. Ostenson, who is not yet 30 years old but who's getting a good reputation in regional, state and national political jingles for his work.

Ostenson is optimistic about the future of mass transit in the auto capital. He says: "We were very pleased to see that TALUS has given recognition to the public transportation problem," a typical, carefully-worded understatement accompanied by a grin.

TALUS, a four-year, \$5 million project of SEMCOG, recommended 81 miles of rail transit lines for southeastern Michigan by 1990, including one line out Grand River and Schoolcraft through Redford, Livonia and Plymouth. Such a recommendation gives SEMTA the kind of planning credentials it needs.

As for the region's pro-auto bias, Ostenson doesn't see it that way: "I think people here show a realistic sense. The auto companies have shown a willingness to adjust. Public transit and auto sales are not inconsistent. We don't advocate abdication of auto. It's here to stay."

"What we do is choose in our system" between private autos and public conveyances, which hurls "those who are too old, too young, too poor."

Even persons with two or more cars in the family could find it feasible to use public

transportation, Ostenson goes on. "Less urban congestion and a more viable core could be the results of the transit system."

LESS OPTIMISTIC is Carl Pursell, a member of the Wayne County Board of Supervisors from the Livonia-Plymouth area, and one of the most fervent believers in public transportation.

Pursell accuses the auto industry of "failing to provide leadership" in the field of public transportation. He says that Irving J. Rubin, director of TALUS and a former State Highway Department official, has a "subconscious bias in favor of roads" (which) leads me to believe he wouldn't be a forceful leader in rapid transit."

Pursell also sees a regional agency like SEMTA as being on the firing line from public officials jealous of their fiefdoms. One example: Detroit Mayor Cavanagh's suggestion that A friend from Ford Motor Co. be appointed to the SEMTA board. (It was rejected.)

But if Pursell is down on the auto companies and small-time politics, he's big on Bill Ostenson. "He's a quiet scrapper. He has learned his way around Lansing and the Detroit Common Council. He's done an excellent job so far," Pursell declares.

BILL OSTENSON was born in Ann Arbor and raised on a small farm outside Tacoma, Wash. He never rode a bus as a boy. "There were none."

He earned a B.A. degree at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma and a law degree at Willamette University in Oregon but never practiced. Instead, he went to the Wharton School in Philadelphia to earn a master's degree in public administration and "drifted" into Philadelphia's transportation authority part-time while finishing up school."

He started as an assistant to the director, the second employee of the authority, and when he left three years later it had 60 employees.

What brought Bill Ostenson here in February of 1967 was not SEMTA but the Metropolitan Fund, the private foundation which spawned and nursed TALUS, SEMCOG and now SEMTA. Ostenson and Joseph Bianco Jr., an investment banker from Bloomfield Hills, drafted the bill creating SEMTA, and State Sen. Gilbert Bursley (R-Arn Arbor) guided it through the Legislature.

Ostenson's title is "executive secretary," which he calls an "interim operating arrangement." SEMTA is authorized to hire a general manager, who would actually run a transportation system, but its board isn't

ready to do so yet. Ostenson's work is in organizing, working with planners, prying funds out of Washington. When SEMTA hires a manager to run (first) a bus system, Ostenson plans to fade out of the picture.

The nine board members are all appointed by the governor, as of now. Three are his personal choices, and the others are picked by him from nominees made in Detroit, the members of SEMCOG and SEMCOG.

By 1971, however, SEMCOG will be appointing those six members directly. This is why people like Carl Pursell are urging Observatory municipalities and school districts to join SEMCOG — not only will SEMCOG approve a 1990 regional plan from TALUS, but it will control the majority on the SEMTA board which will carry out TALUS's major recommendations.

Roughly half the \$347,000 budget for the fiscal year that began July 1 will come from the federal government. The state will chip in another \$55,000. Wayne, Oakland and Washtenaw counties and Detroit kick in \$70,000. (Macomb County, which maintains a stand-off attitude toward regional agencies, hasn't contributed yet, but Ostenson is typically optimistic that it will change.)

PROJECT A for SEMTA is a bus system. A consultant recommended that it consolidate eight public and private firms — including Detroit's DSR and the Northville Coach Line, Inc. — into a single, coordinated system serving the three-county metropolitan area.

Ostenson says that while revenues could pay most of the operating cost of a consolidated bus system, outside funding will be needed for the capital costs. The goal is to be operating in two years, but Ostenson adds that "we don't know whether we can do it in that time or not."

The general manager of Northville Coach Line raised a couple of questions about SEMTA's intentions. Adolph Schiller wanted to know if SEMTA also wanted to get into the charter bus business, too, and whether it wouldn't be feasible for SEMTA to pick up one operation at a time and integrate them rather than to consolidate everything at once.

Ostenson said no decision has been made on the charter business. And he said it would be financially easier to "go whole hog" rather than to absorb the eight bus systems a

WILLIAM H. OSTENSON is executive secretary of SEMTA (Observer photo)

bite at a time.

PROJECT B is rapid transit.

TALUS recommends rails for the five lines it proposes. Ostenson points out that there are other options.

U.S. Transportation Secretary John Volpe says his department is pushing research into four types of vehicles: A scaled-down version of a vehicle that can travel 250 mph; a "Dash" — a railcar with an underground electric, self-propelled vehicle that could carry six to 24 persons at 80 mph; the "Gravitrain," another underground system that works by compressed air; and express buses, operating on a designated freeway lane.

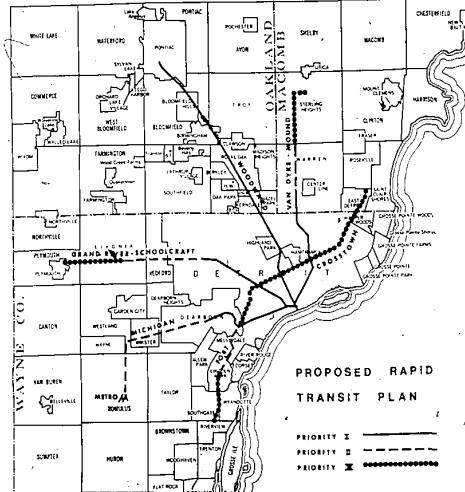
Ostenson says the fixed rail idea looks most feasible, at the moment, for the Grand River-Schoolcraft line.

In estimating that its 81-mile proposed rapid transit system would cost \$1.1 billion, TALUS used 1968 prices for fixed rail.

When will SEMTA begin work?

"It all depends on the availability of financing," Ostenson replied. "Our own recommendations will be available in a year. If no one has to vote, if this board has the power, if there are no objections from the local cities . . ."

"This is a fantastic-public works project." Then he adds: "I still wouldn't want to build unless the citizens were in favor."



TALUS proposes five rapid transit lines (above) for southeastern Michigan. One serving Observatory would come from downtown Detroit out Grand River to Schoolcraft. Two sections east of Merriman Road in Livonia would get first priority. The section from Merriman to downtown Plymouth would come sometime after 1990. SEMTA is currently doing engineering studies.



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